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Reitz or Wrong:
An Industrial, Environmental, and Political Analysis of Evansville's "Lumber Baron"

A Thesis
Presented to the Department of History & Anthropology
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and
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of
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

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Introduction

For nearly two centuries, the history of Evansville, Indiana has remained incomplete as historians and the general public have not recognized some of the key factors responsible for the city's famed past. The generally accepted history of Evansville, the state's third largest city, conveys valiant tales of industrialization, transportation, and successful entrepreneurs who overcame insurmountable odds and left everlasting impressions on the people of the region. While the once prosperous city was a significant national port and participated heavily in transatlantic and transcontinental trade, Evansville's historical significance has diminished over the course of the twentieth century. What were once bustling factories, streams clogged with shipments of imported timber, and railways packed with the products of Evansville's various industries, now stand as vacant remnants, empty lots, or repurposed structures now housing upscale restaurants or offices that merit little to no recognition of historical significance from the modern passerby.

Although the physical remnants of the city's storied, commercial growth have nearly vanished, the legacies left by leading industrialists have continued to shape Evansville's historical memory. Influenced by various works of local history published from the middle of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, public memory of the region has celebrated these prominent figures, through the creation of festivals and scholarships, or the dedication of municipal spaces like schools and museums. These tributes, however, have played a significant role in the omission of crucial features in the story of Evansville and have perpetuated the existence of incomplete narratives. Reexamining the history of Evansville reveals that social and

political elites, often celebrated for transforming the city through their economic ventures, were also responsible for environmental degradation and class inequality

No single figure in Evansville better represents this forgotten aspect of the region's history than John Augustus Reitz. One of the city's most influential community leaders, Reitz earned wealth and local fame through his involvement in community boards, political offices, railroad construction, and most importantly, the lumber industry. Reitz's sawmill, John A. Reitz & Sons, would become the largest manufacturer of lumber in Evansville, during a brief period in the late nineteenth century when the city was widely known as the national leader in hardwood lumber production. Due to Reitz's impact, along with others', the successful men of Evansville's past are celebrated and permanently remembered for bringing prosperity to the city and surrounding region, yet little to no attention has yet been brought to the natural destruction that this industrial growth contributed to. The Reitz family and Evansville historians have played significant roles in shaping how local history is remembered. Through their works, local historians highlight the fame of prominent businessmen, emphasizing their success and philanthropic works, while overlooking the impact they had on the natural environment; for Reitz specifically, this correlates to the physical changes his lumber interests contributed to in surrounding forests.¹ The consequences of these incomplete historical works have led to a disconnect of historical relationships that exist between the human actors of Evansville's past and the environment, as well as a failure to address any implications that exist as a direct result of the city's industrial practices.

¹ Authors of early, local histories are guilty of overlooking environmental degradation, most notably Frank Gilbert, Joseph Elliott, and Brant & Fuller.

This research relies upon existing histories of Evansville from the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century to map the accepted historical narrative and highlight consistencies or contradictions throughout the literature. These historical works serve to walk readers through a chronological tale of Evansville's past, emphasizing significant players and events as the authors deem necessary and important. Additionally, more contemporary research such as historical analyses written in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, scientific studies, and other works under newer factions of historical study serve to aid in the examination of historical memory. Since the backbone of the work revolves around Reitz's lumber endeavors, the argument follows the methodological approaches accepted by a broader community of environmental historians. However, beyond using these methodologies to introduce an overlooked perspective into the narrative of Evansville's industrial history, this theoretical approach has opened this work to more expansive ideas of challenging accepted beliefs and legacies that exist in public memory regarding the origin stories and actions of historical figures.

Due to Reitz's impact, along with that of other local elites, the wealthy men of Evansville's past are celebrated and permanently remembered for bringing prosperity to the city and surrounding region, yet little to no attention has been paid to the natural destruction engendered by this famed industrial growth or these actors' relationships with and views of the working class people whom they needed to achieve such success. The Reitz children and early Evansville historians have played significant roles in the drama of framing legacy and historical memory. Through their publications, local historians highlight the fame of prominent businessmen, emphasizing their success and

philanthropic works (for Reitz specifically, this correlates to the physical changes his lumber interests contributed to in surrounding forests). Additionally, a significant focus on Reitz's status as a German immigrant and devout Roman Catholic has influenced the celebration of his life and career. Political victories stemmed from these identities throughout Reitz's life, and have further entrenched and enhanced his perceived influence on the general populace. It cannot be overlooked that Reitz held powerful political offices in municipal and state level politics, and his ability to rise to these positions has roots in the explosion of the German American population of Evansville during his adult life. Previous histories have failed to place these identities, experiences, and public roles into conversation, leaving gaps in the story of John Reitz and his life in Evansville. The consequences of these incomplete historical works have led to a disconnect of relationships that exist between the human actors of Evansville's past and the environmental or social injustices, as well as a failure to address any contemporary implications that exist as a direct result of the city's industrial reliance.

A Brief Historiography of Evansville

To examine the human and environmental connections that exist in the history of Evansville, I will compare the language and content of various local histories, which can then lead to the discovery of patterns. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Evansville historians, such as Frank Gilbert² and Joseph Elliott,³ showed interest in retelling the story of the region's first settlers, recounting the hardships these people

² Frank M. Gilbert. *History of the City of Evansville and Vanderburg County, Indiana*. Chicago, IL: Pioneer Publishing Company, 1910.

³ Joseph P. Elliott. *A History of Evansville and Vanderburgh County, Indiana: A Complete and Concise Account from the Earliest Times to the Present, Embracing Reminiscences of the Pioneers and Biographical Sketches of the Men Who Have Been Leaders in Commercial and Other Enterprises*. Evansville, IN: Keller Print Co, 1897.

faced and the potential they saw in the land. A work published by Brant & Fuller of Madison, Wisconsin in 1889 focused heavily on Evansville's success in mastering the natural environment by providing statistics and examples of its "boundless energies and limitless resources."⁴ The way that historians discussed these resources, however, changed over the course of continued publication of Evansville local histories. In the most recent local history consulted for this work, James Morlock introduces how the land and its natural resources played a significant role in attracting early settlers, and later prosperous industrial opportunists.⁵ Morlock's text signifies a shift from the previous histories which placed a heavy focus on how the human players profited from their abundant resources to the initial steps of examining nature's influence on human activity in the region.

In their works, these historians, along with other authors and journalists of their era, include detailed accounts of people whom they refer to as leaders in the community.⁶ Specifically, for John Augustus Reitz language such as "public-spirited," "fearless," and "enterprising" appear continuously throughout the biographical sections of these works.⁷ The authors of these histories include local historians, researchers from distant cities like Madison, Wisconsin, and professors at regional universities. For the purpose of the current research, and consistent with the trend in their content, those histories published between the middle of the nineteenth century and 1960 serve as primary sources, providing insights into the portrayal of local heroes that shape public memory. Showing

⁴ *History of Vanderburgh County, IN*. Madison, WI: Brant & Fuller, 1889. p. 94

⁵ James E. Morlock. *The Evansville Story: A Cultural Interpretation*. 1956.

⁶ The most extensive local histories include biographical accounts of the lives of Evansville's elite, wealthy industrialists and business owners from the mid to late nineteenth century.

⁷ Elliott, p. 368-369.

his mastery of industrial ideologies and his philanthropic efforts, these authors have further cemented a legacy of Reitz that overlooks the more technical details of his most profitable business in lumber and how his livelihood altered the natural environment. Reexamining the framework of these local histories and the stories they intend to tell is crucial for understanding how the existence, influence, and destruction of the natural world has been overlooked and further embedded within Evansville's pride in its leading entrepreneurs and industrial growth.

According to local historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, credit the ability for Evansville, a relatively small settlement on the banks of the Ohio River, to develop into a significant national, and international port for hardwood lumber to the diligent work of Evansville's leading businessmen. However, these industrialists achieved success, especially John A. Reitz, at the expense of the natural resources present during Evansville's initial founding and industrial growth. Morlock has come the closest to understanding the natural environment's importance in Evansville's industrial success in his work published in 1956. Here he dares to venture where earlier historians had failed to, stating that:

There are six important factors, all somewhat inter-related, which were responsible for this growth: 1. The topography and natural resources of the surrounding area; 2. The promise of the Wabash and Erie Canal; 3. The attraction of skilled of skilled workers; 4. The accumulation of capital resources; 5. The rapid increase in the use of tools and machines, and; 6. The sound leadership that was attracted to the growing town.⁸

While the list of factors includes some direct references to the natural environment of the region, which differs from local histories published in the previous century, it continues to show emphasis at the end of the list, as well as throughout the rest of the work, to the

⁸ Morlock, p. 52

industrialists that brought wealth to the city. Morlock's work follows the trend of earlier local histories and many other works focusing on nineteenth century industrialists by attributing the economic success of cities like Evansville, that relied heavily upon the exploitation of natural resources, to wealthy, politically powerful industrialists. Accepting the narratives these works provide perpetuates dangerous and misleading views of class inequality, political intentions, and privilege.

Altering Environments

To begin analyzing how the industrial history of Evansville's lumber manufacturing and the memory of John A. Reitz work into the suppression of the presence of the natural world in this narrative, a deeper understanding of environmental history must be introduced. This subfield in the discipline of history addresses the conceptualization and understanding of nature's role in the human story. Arising from the legacy of the social justice movements in the 1960s, environmental history began in the 1970s, predominantly led by U.S. historians searching for deeper understandings of humans' impact on nature in the past and vice versa.⁹ As the field has grown and expanded, American historians' dominance has diminished as more branches have sprouted out of the original ideas, including material, political, and cultural environmental histories. The story of Evansville lies in the realm of material environmental history, where authors place "human history in a fuller context...concern[ing] the past 200 years, when industrialization, among other forces, greatly enhanced the human power to alter environments."¹⁰ In a new age of

⁹ J. R. McNeill. "The State of the Field of Environmental History." *Annual Reviews*. August 16, 2010. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-environ-040609-105431>. p. 347.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 347

environmental history, those working in this field strive to connect human history with the environment through a multitude of factors.¹¹ Diverging slightly from the discipline, Reitz or Wrong uses a human as the lens into these past relationships with nature, while continuing to credit both natural and human roles in these complex histories.

William Cronon, one of the leading historians in this realm, wrote *Nature's Metropolis* which became a groundbreaking analysis of the relationship between the urban and natural worlds.¹² In 2017, during an interview celebrating the 25th anniversary of his work, Cronon touched on the current state of environmental history and what precautions people working in this field must take when writing. At the basis of historical work, Cronon believes, there lies narrative, and in that telling of a story resides a moral lesson. However, with that lesson, environmental history must avoid environmental determinism.¹³ In other words, authors must not predispose any moral or cultural biases upon the subjects of their work, creating judgements based on ideologies or knowledge that would not have existed in certain times or societies of the past. Cronon argues that environmental historians must "be fair to the people whose lives we narrate...to see the world through their eyes."¹⁴ Environmental history should invite people to dig deeper into their local histories and begin making connections between wealth, power, industrialization, and the appeal and relative abundance of natural resources. These relationships will further reveal themselves after a dialogue has been

¹¹ Paul S Sutter. "World with Us: The State of American Environmental History." *Oxford Academic: The Journal of American History*. June 01, 2013. Accessed March 24, 2019. <https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/100/1/94/747851>.

¹² William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

¹³ McNeill, p. 359-360

¹⁴ "Nature's Metropolis Turns 25: A Conversation with William Cronon." Interview. *Edge Effects* (audio blog), April 4, 2017. Accessed March 25, 2019. <http://edgeeffects.net/natures-metropolis/>.

created, and they are no longer embedded within political, economic, and industrial aspects of local history.

The Gateway to the South

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the city of Evansville led the United States in hardwood lumber manufacturing.¹⁵ During this prosperous time, several prominent families rose through the social ranks of the community because of their involvement in the local lumber industry. John Augustus Reitz, once coined the “lumber baron of the Midwest,” owned and operated one of the most successful sawmills in the area, John A. Reitz & Sons. Between 1883 and 1893, this mill was the greatest manufacturer of hardwood lumber in Evansville, making Reitz the owner of the leading lumber manufacturer in the United States at the time.¹⁶ Evansville’s lumber industry saw extreme growth at the beginning of the 1840’s. An increasing national focus on railroads, and Evansville’s unique geographic position provided an ideal atmosphere for trade and rail commerce.¹⁷ Several important railroad projects arose with the help of influential, wealthy figures, including Reitz. John A. Reitz became the president of the Evansville, Carmi, and Paducah railroad company, and was heavily involved in another rail project running from Evansville to Nashville, Tennessee.¹⁸ These rails allowed Evansville to become a significant center for manufacturing. The city was considered “the southern terminal” for the Evansville and Crawfordsville Railroad specifically, which “played no

¹⁵ Various histories, including those of Gilbert, Elliot, Brant & Fuller, and Elliot, all mention Evansville’s national significance in lumber production. While the specific range in years varies, there is undoubtedly a consensus that Evansville had produced more hardwood lumber than any other city in the United States near the end of the nineteenth century.

¹⁶ Elliott, p. 370

¹⁷ Additionally, Evansville was referred to as “the gateway to the south, being farther south than any principal city in the northern states.” [*The Book of Evansville, Illustrated*. Evansville, IN: Unigraphic, Inc., 1978. p. 3. Willard Library Special Collections (Hereafter WLSC)]

¹⁸ Gilbert, p. 13

small part” during the North-South trade prior to the Civil War.¹⁹ This trade helped boost the demand for lumber, which increased even decades after the war was over.

During the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, southern states struggled economically, and “to a large portion of the South, Evansville was the most convenient depot for supplies.”²⁰ Business grew tremendously, inspiring many men in the region to make their names in this line of work. The lumber industry employed “Dealers in Lumber, Slash and Bind Manufacturers, and Contractors and Builders, as well as Manufacturers of Furniture, Chairs, Wagons, etc.,” however, the sawmills not only brought more commercial attention to the region, but also supplied these other sectors with necessary materials.²¹ John Reitz & Sons was not the first nor last of Evansville’s lumber mills established in this time period. The region surrounding the city, “within 100 miles” in every direction, offered immensely dense forests which “had just about all varieties of woods.”²² Evansville’s geographic location provided “accessibility to the immense lumber region of Indiana, Kentucky and the tributary sections.”²³ Reitz and other leading lumber men saw these forests as natural assets for an industry that seemed to promise success. According to Morlock, the capital resources obtained by the industrialists of this era could only be made possible by the natural resources present.²⁴

The products of Evansville’s lumber industry traveled to far-reaching places, contributing to the city’s national and international reputation. John Reitz & Sons

¹⁹ Louis P. Benezet. *1850-1950 One Hundred Years*. p. 28. RHMC.

²⁰ Brant & Fuller, p. 134

²¹ Charles E. Robert. *Evansville, Her Commerce and Manufactures: A Descriptive Work of the Business Metropolis of Indiana*. Evansville, IN: Courier Company, 1874. p. 345

²² Ed Small. “The Evolution of the Furniture Industry in Evansville, Indiana: Globe-Bosse-World.” Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, 2009. Indiana Room Collection, Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Archive (Hereafter EVPLA-IRC)

²³ Robert, p. 344

²⁴ Morlock, p. 53

typically sold its lumber to “Indianapolis, Chicago, and other cities in the North.”²⁵ For other lumber manufacturers, however, the majority of the industry’s output was shipped to Southern states, and occasionally to European nations.²⁶ These products took various forms as well. Some external companies purchased the sawed lumber for rail car manufacturing, which was especially beneficial for Evansville’s growing railroads, while other boards were sent to furniture factories across the United States, and other craftsmen in Germany and England.²⁷

Drawing on the works of Brant & Fuller and Morlock primarily, I gathered that the gross product of Evansville’s lumber industry in 1859 was \$296,000.²⁸ However, this value rapidly increased to \$2,545,000 in 1880, when the estimated yearly output of lumber products reached 107,500,000 feet.²⁹ Following this rise, the industry continued to expand, reaching a value of \$3,228,000 in 1889, the year which can be considered the peak of Evansville’s lumber production. The lumber industry contributed to over one third of the city’s industrial economy. In addition to the wealth in production this industry brought to the city, lumber mills and other manufacturing centers employed great numbers of the local workforce, which included many immigrants who shared regional ties to John Reitz.

Three years after this peak, in 1891, an article published in the Evansville Courier provided a more detailed account of the six most successful mills in the city. John Reitz & Sons led this pack of elite sawmills in both size and production, for this fell in the time

²⁵ Evansville Courier (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891: 8. Evansville Historical Newspapers, Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Archive (Hereafter EVPLA-EHN)

²⁶ *The Book of Evansville, Illustrated*, p. 3

²⁷ Evansville Courier (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891.

²⁸ Morlock, p. 106

²⁹ Brant & Fuller, p. 143

frame of Reitz's reign as the nation's leading hardwood lumber manufacturer. The reporter for this story estimated the value of the over 100 million feet of lumber produced by these six mills to be around \$1,500,000. The output of John A. Reitz and Sons in this year was assessed at just over \$250,000.³⁰ The value of the Reitz mill in 1891 nearly reached the gross profit of Evansville's entire lumber production in 1859, only thirty-two years earlier. As with other aspects of the nineteenth-century, American economy, the availability of and access to natural resources led to rapid growth in the industrial sector.

Other individuals found success in various other manufacturing practices in the city, and Evansville leaders came to rival the wealth and political clout of social elites in other prominent cities of the state. The wealth of individuals and the population of wealthy individuals within communities became a way to measure progress during and after the Civil War. In local newspapers, editors constantly published articles comparing the status and growth of cities within Indiana, attempting to show the dominance of their home to create strong senses of pride that would effectively create strong regional identities. In 1865, "the *Evansville Daily Journal* concluded that Evansville compared favorably with Indianapolis."³¹ To compete with Indianapolis, the state's capital, meant that Evansville dominated the industrial scene and the elites of the city rivaled or even outcompeted some of the wealthiest individuals in Indiana. As with other aspects of Evansville and the local elites like Reitz, newspapers and popular histories tended to frame the success of a select few in generally positive and optimistic terms. However, social inequality and widening wealth gaps became physically noticeable in the city's

³⁰ Evansville Courier (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891. EVPLA-EHN

³¹ Darrel E. Bigham. *Towns and Villages of the Lower Ohio*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998. p. 155

layout as the rich secured more of the wealth and moved to exclusive neighborhoods, far away from the communities of the working class.³²

Rise of the Lumber Baron

Reitz's involvement and dominance in local lumber manufacturing is evident throughout the recorded history of Evansville. This success sets up the narrative for Reitz's story of prosperity, heroism, and high esteem that exists in prominent local histories. Born in Dorlar, Prussia on December 17, 1815, John Augustus Reitz was raised in a Catholic, landowning family. Reitz's paternal grandfather owned a salt distillery and several large estates, which were later passed to his son Franz Josef, who operated a liquor distillery, an inn, and a flour mill.³³ With the profits from these various ventures, his family afforded to send John A. Reitz to Esloh, "one of the important educational centers of Prussia," at the age of twelve.³⁴ Several historians recall that upon finishing his education, Reitz displayed immense courage by deciding to become the first of his native village to migrate to the United States in 1836. He was 21 years old. Reitz first arrived in Baltimore, Maryland in December of 1836, later traveling to Louisville, Kentucky where he settled for about one year. The young immigrant envisioned starting a pottery business in Evansville, a nearby town that was slowly gaining more commercial significance because of the prospects of the Wabash and Erie Canal. Following with the popular theme, Joseph Elliott writes that Reitz "had at the time but one gold piece of money in his

³² Ibid, p. 155

³³ Following the death of Reitz's grandfather, his grandmother took over the family businesses at the age of 81, which she continued to operate for thirty years. She died at the age of 116. [Personal Family Records, Reitz Home Museum Collection (Hereafter RHMC).]

³⁴ Gilbert, p. 12

pocket” in his initial days in America, setting the stage for his eventual rise to local fame.³⁵

After settling in Evansville in 1838, however, Reitz’s pottery business did not produce the necessary profit, forcing him to find work elsewhere. Reitz began working at an Evansville sawmill owned by Silas Stephens,³⁶ where he learned the basics of the industry, giving him the experience and capital necessary to ultimately start his own mill in 1845. This mill, located at the mouth of Pigeon Creek in downtown Evansville, eventually became “one of the largest hardwood lumber mills in the country.”³⁷ Reitz continued to run the mill until his death in May of 1891, suffering at least three significant fires, and expanding the mill in 1873 to incorporate his sons, when it earned its official name of John A. Reitz & Sons.³⁸

The mill was in operation for a staggering seventy-three years, from its initial founding in 1845 until 1918. Public discourse surrounding the mill suggests that it ran twenty-two out of twenty-four hours per day, six out of seven days every week. As an ode to Reitz’s generosity as an employer, one work mentions that an organized strike never occurred or interrupted the operations of the mill because Mr. Reitz ran an efficient mill and was kind to workers.³⁹ At the end of the mill’s reign, John A. Reitz’s son, Francis Joseph, was the sole owner. John A. Reitz & Sons was “the oldest business in the United States west of the Allegheny mountains” when it was first announced that the

³⁵ Elliott, p. 369

³⁶ The first use of steam power in the city of Evansville was in the Silas Stephens sawmill, established in 1837. (Morlock, p. 57)

³⁷ Brant & Fuller, p. 163

³⁸ Marilyn Harshbarger. “A Study of the Philanthropic Contributions of John Augustus Reitz and Family.” May 6, 1991. RHMC.

³⁹ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Vanderburgh County Indiana*. Evansville, IN: Press of the Keller Printing Co., 1897. p. 90

leading lumberman's son would be closing the family business.⁴⁰ This announcement introduced an abrupt end for a mill of such significance; nonetheless, Francis Joseph no longer wished to "be bothered by too many business ventures" and proclaimed to the public and employed workers that the mill would discontinue operations after the last logs of the most recent purchases had been sawed.⁴¹ Less than one year after this publication, the largest hardwood lumber mill in Evansville's history closed its doors.

John A Reitz & Sons, along with other businesses that Reitz formed with close associates following the founding of his mill, shifted the tide for this ambitious immigrant and his family, launching them into a selective class of social elites. Although Reitz undoubtedly had wealth and connections when he arrived in Evansville, his economic status would rise dramatically over the course of a few decades. In the 1850 United States Census, only five years after opening his lumber mill, Reitz first appeared as an official resident of Evansville. Listed as a saw miller, his young mill began to define his identity, yet with a total real estate value of \$5,000, the profits from the venture had not yet set him apart from other small business owners.⁴² While his listed occupation would change slightly with each census following 1850, the most noticeable difference resides in the growth of personal and real estate value. Twenty years after his initial appearance, John Reitz, now listed as a foundryman, reported values of his personal estate at \$125,000 and real estate at \$400,000 in the 1870 Census.⁴³ The rapid growth in property value

⁴⁰ Evansville Courier (Evansville, IN) September 23, 1917. Reitz Collection, Willard Library Archive (Hereafter WLA).

⁴¹ Evansville Courier (Evansville, IN) September 23, 1917. Reitz Collection, WLA.

⁴² In the 1850 U.S. Census, John Reitz was listed as John "Ritz," an error which would not occur in any following censuses mentioning Reitz or his family [Harshbarger, RHMC].

⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau. Inhabitants in 6th Ward Evansville, in the County of Vanderburgh, State of Indiana, 1870.

experienced by Reitz secured his position among the wealthiest members of Evansville society, and more importantly one of the wealthiest, foreign-born elites.

The success of the Reitz lumber mill is only part of the story portrayed in local histories, however. Throughout the years of his business, John Reitz became a public figure in Evansville. Among his positions at the head of railroad projects, Reitz held various leadership roles in the city. Serving as president of the board of trustees for the town of Lamasco, Reitz aided in its consolidation with the city of Evansville, a project which would serve him and his political affiliates well in the future.⁴⁴ In the economic sector, Reitz served as vice president and eventually president of the Crescent City bank, “one of the solid banking organizations of the state.”⁴⁵ Historians have additionally exemplified his role in founding the German National Bank. Eventually rising to the title of president in this enterprise, Reitz would remain in that role for the rest of his life. Working with other prominent men of the region, he created partnerships in realty, foundry, and machinery ventures.⁴⁶ Evidently, local historians used Reitz public positions and business ventures to highlight the influence he had over the people and the positive benefits he brought to the region.

However, what solidified Reitz’s legacy further into the public memory of Evansville, resides in the philanthropic donations he and his children contributed to the city. In a local newspaper, an article printed the day after his death focused on his “charitable and public spirited” nature.⁴⁷ This charity appeared throughout other texts and manifested itself physically in several architectural structures in Evansville. Reitz and his

⁴⁴ Gilbert, p. 13

⁴⁵ *Biographical Encyclopedia*, p. 88

⁴⁶ Elliott, p. 370

⁴⁷ Evansville Courier (Evansville, IN), May 14, 1891. John Augustus Reitz folder, RHMC.

family were devoted Catholics and members of Holy Trinity Catholic Church, but John Augustus was additionally responsible for the building of this church. However, his contributions did not stop with his own parish. Reitz “donated not only the ground, 75 x 150 feet, but also the church building, 32 x 85 feet” for Sacred Heart Church, of which he supervised and led the construction in 1889.⁴⁸ The “Home of the Aged” ran by the Little Sisters of the Poor that once stood in Evansville can trace its lineage back to Reitz as well. As a result of these donations, one local historian from the nineteenth century was inclined to state the following about John A. Reitz:

While firm in his own convictions of right and wrong, he was most charitably disposed toward others who differed from him. In truth he was liberal and thoroughly American in his attitude toward all other organizations and churches, and extended to them the same toleration he expected in return. He contributed to every church in the city regardless of faith, and was well-known for his liberality.⁴⁹

Such statements, especially in a work published only six years after Reitz’s death, would have a significant impact on the shaping of his reputation in the public memory.

The Reitz family is estimated to have donated 3 million dollars to different groups within the Evansville community, most memorably through the dedication of buildings like orphanages and churches. However, the donations did not halt with the death of the family patriarch. Following his death, John Reitz’s children used their father’s wealth to further imprint his legacy on the city, ensuring his extended presence in the public eye. Possibly the most well-known of his children, Francis Joseph Reitz, used his inheritance and social capital to rise through the ranks of several political, economic, and community institutions. In 1914, F. J., as he was more commonly referred to, was considered “a

⁴⁸ Brant & Fuller, p. 298

⁴⁹ Elliott, p. 371

bachelor, worth in excess of, oh, say, five millions.”⁵⁰ F. J. would become the president of several banks in the city, as well as the owner of the family lumber mill, and in these positions of influence, he made significant strides in solidifying his father’s permanent place in the city’s history. In the early twentieth century, F. J. Reitz set aside \$700,000 for the construction of an orphanage, organized the building of a public high school (which would become Reitz High School), and in 1922 donated \$900,000 to build Reitz Memorial Catholic High School, in honor of his parents.⁵¹ Additionally, the family home that John Augustus Reitz built in 1871 still stands as a museum today, and remains one of Evansville’s top historic attractions, being placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

The Age of Civilization is at Hand

When considering Evansville’s extensive and prominent industrial past, little has been recorded of the natural world’s place in this story. Local landscapes undoubtedly changed significantly throughout this transformative era, especially the forests within and surrounding the region. In the story of Reitz, historians have left out of local narratives the environmental damage that his industrial practice inflicted. Prior to American settlement, “deep forest covered [the Evansville] area almost completely...an equilibrium had existed for hundreds of years between animals and plants...between climate and vegetation.”⁵² However, while Morlock’s work from the middle of the twentieth century begins to show some recognition of the natural world, it cannot serve as a representation for what earlier or other histories of the region attempt to portray. According to other

⁵⁰ Elbert Hubbard. *A Little Journey to the City National Bank*. Evansville, IN: 1914. Indiana Room Collection, Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library Archive.

⁵¹ Tess Grimm. “History of the Home Museum.” RHMC

⁵² Morlock, p. 1-2

historians, “the age of civilization [was] at hand,” which meant that the forests could no longer remain in their full abundance if human progress were to ensue.⁵³ Any mention of the forests of the region in Evansville’s early history refers to them as “dense and wolf-infested,” a threat to public safety.⁵⁴ These seemingly dangerous and endless forests had commercial significance, however, and “made [Evansville] prime territory for settlers,” especially those searching for industrial and economic success.⁵⁵

Few records exist that describe the quantity of lumber which was being imported from the surrounding forests by John A. Reitz & Sons and other mills in the city. However, on occasion, a historical work or newspaper article from this era of mass production in Evansville will reference which of these natural depositories could provide the best quality product for the industrialists. Possibly the most detailed account of which local forests had been targeted by Evansville’s lumber industry appears in Charles Robert’s work on Evansville’s commercial and industrial practices. Robert states that:

The best Poplar known in this section is obtained in the upper Ohio and Green River Valleys... Yellow Pine, for flooring purposes, and Poplar, of the finest quality, are cut in unlimited quantities in the regions bordering on the Tennessee River... large quantities of Oak and Cypress... Walnut, Ash, Gum and Hickory... are well supplied in unlimited quantities from native forests.⁵⁶

The species of tree that could be found in Evansville’s lumber mills and other manufactures were not limited to Robert’s list, and included various others that lived in abundance in nearby counties and states.⁵⁷

⁵³ Robert, p. 346

⁵⁴ Brant & Fuller, p. 70

⁵⁵ Betty Lawson Walters. *Furniture Makers of Indiana 1793-1850*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society Publications, 1972. p. 11. EVPLA-IRC

⁵⁶ Robert, p. 345

⁵⁷ Evansville’s lumber suppliers offered products from an array of tree species, including poplar, yellow pine, oak (red, white, and burr), cypress, walnut (black and white), ash, gum, hickory, elm, birch, cherry,

The same sources that praise Reitz and other leading men involved in the lumber industry, while leaving out the environmentally catastrophic details of mass deforestation in the surrounding forests, provide sparse trails of information and statistics that allow new analyses of these practices to be linked with more current observations. Evansville newspapers were especially quick to print lumber statistics in the nineteenth century to express the pride that arose from the city's economic success. An article published on August 9, 1891 in the Evansville Courier tells of the six most successful lumber mills, John A Reitz & Sons included, and the over 200,000 logs that these mills ordered annually.⁵⁸ The logs at this time were primarily coming from the Green River valley that Robert and other historians mention briefly.

Contemporary understandings of deciduous forests can provide a better examination of these statistics and accounts of the impact of Evansville's lumber activities. According to a study of the forests in Indiana, published in 2013, the average forest in the state contains over 400 trees per acre, and "seventy-eight percent of forest land consists of sawtimber."⁵⁹ With John A. Reitz & Sons purchasing around 50,000 logs annually, the mill was destroying around 125 acres of local forests every year.⁶⁰ The Reitz mill contributed to the destruction of local forests for seventy-three years of continuous operation, yet no records exist to detail this destruction and no measures were taken to preserve the remaining natural resources after these had been removed. A similar

sassafras, hackberry, box elder, locust, cottonwood, willow, sycamore, pecan, and others. (Small, p. 2. EVPLA-IRC).

⁵⁸ Evansville Courier (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891. EVPL-EHN

⁵⁹ Dale D. Gormanson. *Indiana Forests 2013*. United States Department of Agriculture, December 2018. p.

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⁶⁰ Evansville Courier (Evansville, Indiana), August 9, 1891. EVPL-EHN

story can be told of other lumber manufacturers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Evansville.

Although the existing history of Evansville's lumber industry lacks an adequate examination and makes it impossible to adequately measure the consequences suffered by the natural environment, this can be better understood by following the trail of newspapers and works local historians left behind. These sources, as noted previously, occasionally mention where much of the lumber was being purchased from, which can then provide a pathway to analyze the historical deforestation that occurred in these regions. The Upper Ohio River Valley, targeted for its quality poplar trees, served as a significant source for many lumber mills in the city because of Evansville's location on the banks of the Ohio River. Historically, since the first European settlers arrived in the regions around the Upper Ohio, the area has faced "several types of resource extraction – including logging."⁶¹ This river valley, similar to the other regions that provided large quantities of logs for Evansville's sawmills, relied on the forests to support wildlife diversity, both on land and in rivers, as well as the overall health of the land. The timber of the region was cut extensively in the early twentieth century to supply lumber interests of cities downstream, resulting in "the region's forest cover [being] reduced from an estimated 90 percent to less than 30 percent."⁶² Such a drastic change in the local topography had an irreversible impact on the soil, river, and wildlife in the Upper Ohio. The region suffered extensive "erosion, decreases in bank stability, reduced shading and increases in stream temperatures."⁶³ Although the implementation of restoration efforts

⁶¹ Michele DePhilip & Tara Moberg. *Ecosystem Flow Recommendations for the Upper Ohio River Basin in Western Pennsylvania*. Harrisburg, PA: The Nature Conservancy, 2013. p. 11

⁶² DePhilip & Moberg, p. 11

⁶³ Ibid, p. 11

has shown improvements in the ecosystem's resilience, the vulnerabilities caused by the history of deforestation make the Upper Ohio more vulnerable to changes due to increased temperature and precipitation.⁶⁴

Similarly, forests surrounding the Tennessee River supplied Evansville's lumbermen with products for their mills. The forests in Tennessee remained relatively intact prior to the introduction of railroads. However, as rail commerce became a popular form of transporting people and materials in an industrial age, the expansive forests began to diminish. John A. Reitz was directly involved in the introduction of rails in this region due to his direction "of the Nashville division of [a rail] system from Evansville to Nashville, Tennessee."⁶⁵ Resulting from an increased interest in rail commerce, "beginning in the 1870s, Nashville and Memphis promoters welcomed Northeast lumbermen into the state" to extract timber from the local forests.⁶⁶ With several factors at play, the start of northern lumber influences in the region introduced a destructive era for Tennessee's forests. In the years between 1880 and 1920, in which John A. Reitz & Sons had reached its peak of lumber production, "the greatest timber extraction in the state's history occurred" leading to "rapid deforestation" and "long-term environmental changes."⁶⁷

Despite the natural destruction that occurred partially because of the lumber industry in Evansville and other regions of the country, state and national organizations have worked to preserve the remaining forests. The Green River Valley provided much of

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 85

⁶⁵ Gilbert, p. 12

⁶⁶ Margaret Lynn Brown. "Timber Industry." *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Tennessee Historical Society, October 8, 2017. Accessed April 26, 2019. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/timber-industry/>

⁶⁷ Ibid

the lumber for John A. Reitz & Sons in the mill's later years.⁶⁸ The state of Kentucky deemed this region a State Forest, which works to protect the wildlife and natural resources of the area. Another nearby site, Mammoth Cave National Park, serves to educate visitors about historic deforestation and inform them of steps that have been taken to preserve the Green River Valley. In the middle of the twentieth century, "the establishment of National Forests" helped to diminish the "dramatic loss of wildlife" due to deforestation.⁶⁹ Although the responses in the affected regions have experienced success in efforts to improve the treatment of forests, the narrative of Evansville's lumber industry continues to forget the significant damage enacted upon the natural environment. The historians that wrote of the heavily timbered hills in Evansville's early years would hardly recognize the barren fields that lie in their place.

A Sturdy and Courageous Race

Expanding beyond the economic and environmental impact John Reitz had on Evansville, the cultural and religious aspects of his identity created a positive public image of him that boosted his legitimacy and secured his place among powerful elites of the city. Understanding the various identities that Reitz held, and which have been exploited by public memory and local histories, sheds more light onto the reasons why the environmental impact of John Reitz and other Evansville industrialists like him has been overlooked. Additionally, highlighting how these identities and positions of power have shaped the way Reitz is remembered alludes to deeper issues in how members of the region, as well as other regions in the country that share similar paths of development and industrialization, have historically perceived the environment. Accepting incomplete

⁶⁸ Evansville Courier (Evansville, IN) September 23, 1917. Reitz Collection, WLA.

⁶⁹ Brown

narratives about the environment shapes how people view nature in relation to themselves, and how their race, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, and political beliefs give them power over it and other people.

Throughout southern Indiana, and in Evansville particularly, German American culture and traditions have persisted over generations, preserving a heritage that has shaped the region's history and public memory. Different social institutions, including politics, religion, and schools, reflect the influence of German Americans. As waves of immigrants traveled to the United States throughout the nineteenth century, they sought to establish themselves in a place in which they could pursue their economic goals as well as preserve traditions and lifestyles that existed in previous eras of their lives. Attempting to generalize about the experiences of these immigrants, however, creates challenges and can have lasting implications, which can be seen through the narrative of John Reitz's life.

Understanding the size, demographics, and impact of German immigrants in Evansville is crucial to grasping the magnitude of Reitz's legacy in this community. Most German immigrants that arrived in Evansville came from the "great influx of German people" that occurred in the 1840s and 1850s.⁷⁰ In the late 1840s, many of the migrants arriving from German states had fled political conflict and were mostly peasants and farmers.⁷¹ These migrants did not, however, go unnoticed in the population of the region. By 1850, "35.6 percent of the populace had been born abroad, primarily in what would become Germany" in Vanderburgh County, where Evansville resides.⁷² This figure later

⁷⁰ Morlock, p. 55

⁷¹ Darrel E. Bigham. *Reflections on A Heritage: The German Americans in Southwestern Indiana*. Evansville, IN: Indiana Committee for the Humanities, 1980. p. 3

⁷² Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 109

rose to 40.7 percent in 1860.⁷³ For nearly thirty years, beginning in 1850, German immigrants and second generation German Americans would make up “the largest single component of the Evansville population.”⁷⁴ Later waves of German migrants, especially after the Civil War, would shift to manufacturing work, including in sawmills like that of John Reitz.⁷⁵ Of the men employed in manufacturing, 47.8 were German, the largest representation of any ethnic group including native-born citizens in Evansville.⁷⁶ Of the entire workforce in 1860, “45 percent of [Evansville’s] workforce was born in Germany.”⁷⁷ Undoubtably, German migrants not only had a significant presence in everyday life of Evansville but especially in the manufacturing which would lead to the city’s widespread success.

Further emphasizing the impact of German Americans in Evansville, Vanderburgh County had one of the highest percentages of German-born residents and people with German-born parents in the state of Indiana. In the 1880s, at the height of German settlement in this region, Vanderburgh County recorded a population of 6,379 Germans. A significant majority of the German-born residents, 1,464 people, claimed Prussia as their region of origin, the same region from which John Reitz migrated.⁷⁸ With a total population of roughly 42,200 in 1880, this figure shows that Vanderburgh County consisted of slightly more than 15 percent German-born residents.⁷⁹ When comparing the German population of all Indiana counties in 1880, Vanderburgh ties for second in

⁷³ Ibid, p. 109

⁷⁴ Lawrence M. Lipin. *Producers, Proletarians, and Politicians: Workers and Party Politics in Evansville and New Albany, Indiana, 1850-87.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1994. p. 99

⁷⁵ Bigham, *Reflection on A Heritage*, p. 6

⁷⁶ Lipin, p. 83-84

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 78

⁷⁸ Giles R. Hoyt. “Germans.” *Peopling Indiana: The Ethnic Experience*. Ed. Robert M. Taylor and Connie A. McBirney. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society, 1996. 146-81. p. 151

⁷⁹ Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 254

proportion to total population (the state average is 5 percent), but with a higher total population, Vanderburgh ranks higher than all but Marion County, home of Indianapolis, in terms of total German-born residents (see Figure 5 in Appendix). Additionally, “By 1900 close to 40 percent of Vanderburgh County residents were German-born or had German-born parents,” or roughly 28,720 of the county’s 71,800 residents.⁸⁰

For most German migrants, the communities they established with each other allowed for not only the continuation of Germanic customs, but also their isolation effectively creating small German villages in the region which would continue to hold these values for generations. With the waves of migrants, strong drives to ensure that traditions and culture stayed intact.⁸¹ The characteristics of the German population in Evansville share many similarities to those of Reitz and his family, partially contributing to his widespread popularity as a public figure. For many residents of the city, “a sense of Germanness pervaded much of Evansville society” which contributed to a strong sense of solidarity among the German population and their descendants.⁸²

The German language as well as the religious base that many brought from their home country became evident throughout many communities in the city. Stemming from a variety of Germanic states, the German migrants that entered the United States during the nineteenth century created a vast religious diversity in Evansville and the surrounding region. German Americans:

were divided almost equally into Catholics and Protestants. The latter group was further divided among Lutherans and Evangelical-Reformed (Calvinists). In addition, there were several groups of Anabaptists who had fundamental differences with the Protestant state churches as well as among themselves. To these groups can be added the smaller number of

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 236, 254

⁸¹ Bigham, *Reflections on A Heritage*, p. 6

⁸² Lipin, p. 89

German-Jewish immigrants to indicate the complexity underlying any simple appellation “German.”⁸³

John Reitz, like many of his German American counterparts, continued to devoutly practice Catholicism until his death, raising his children in the religion as well. Religion remained the main connection to the German heritage for many immigrants and their families, allowing them to speak German, share thoughts, and participate in traditions with other German Americans for years to come.⁸⁴ Churches provided ways for German Americans to “[reaffirm] a German identity...into the twentieth century,” and arguably into the twenty-first century in the various German Catholic communities that continue to thrive.⁸⁵ The size of the German Catholic population, of which Reitz was included in, allowed them to rival English-speaking residents, allowing “them to accept American values on their own terms” and resist forces of change longer than other ethnic groups.⁸⁶ For other prominent German denominations as well, the “American tradition of separation of church and state...offered and guaranteed religious freedom.”⁸⁷ Religion became a central piece to German identity in Evansville, strengthening shared bonds and further embedding the resilience of German culture.

Both local Democrats and Republicans sought the support of the German population throughout the course of the nineteenth century. As a significant portion of the population and an even more important sector of the workforce, winning the backing of Germans could be critical for political victory. For the most part, the Democratic Party found the most support from this group, realizing that “Democratic success depended on

⁸³ Hoyt, p. 147

⁸⁴ Bigham, *Reflections on a Heritage*, p. 10, 23

⁸⁵ Lipin, p. 101

⁸⁶ Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 238

⁸⁷ Hoyt, p. 153

the party's ability to attract German working-class voters."⁸⁸ Political leaders understood the German community to have strong partisan ties, stemming from the robust ties that Germans had to each other and their culture which would cause them to vote the same as other Germans.⁸⁹ For much of the nineteenth century, especially after the Civil War, local Democrats won the support of the German electorate. Wealthy German employers who had political influence, including Reitz, assisted in Democratic success by providing significant portions of the German working-class with jobs.⁹⁰ Additionally, the wealthy elites established churches in the communities of German workers, meeting the desire of these groups to stay connected to their heritage and build solidarity.⁹¹ With this perspective, some of the philanthropic actions of John Reitz take a slightly different meaning and seem to hold political motivations. Regardless, Reitz's contributions and those of other elite Democrats helped to secure German support for their party in Evansville.

Despite the solidarity among German communities in Evansville, distinctions existed between the majority of the German population and the wealthy, elites that employed and politically represented them. Whereas many German migrants coming to Evansville came with lower socioeconomic statuses and were forced to find work in factories within the city or farm in other parts of the region, some of the more influential leaders of these communities began life in America with elevated wealth and status. Despite commonly accepted beliefs of the contrary, "German immigrants, were not

⁸⁸ Lipin, p. 163

⁸⁹ Bigham, *Reflection on a Heritage*, p. 18

⁹⁰ Saw mills in Evansville, particularly, employed large numbers of Germans. The workforce of such mills in the city "was 40 percent German." Lipin, p. 105

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 105

necessarily poor.”⁹² For John Reitz, the narrative pursued by members of nineteenth century Evansville and local historians portray a tale of drive, ambition, and natural skill overcoming the challenges of starting anew as an immigrant in the United States. Examining Reitz’s origins closer, however, provides a different picture of his seemingly humble origins.

As mentioned previously, John Reitz lived in Dorlar, Prussia where his family operated various businesses and agricultural ventures. While Reitz’s background may share similarities to other German immigrants in Evansville, the extent of the Reitz family’s operation far exceeded that of others. Following the extensive schooling he received at a prominent educational center, John Reitz oversaw the “75 to 80 people” which worked for the family by “[cultivating] the land and [caring] for the livestock: 100-125 horses, 150-200 head of cattle, and 500-600 sheep.”⁹³ Evidently, Reitz did not leave Germany due to political, religious, or financial challenges; rather, he left for opportunities to expand his wealth and influence, a reality that emphasizes the privilege he experienced that many other immigrants could not. Contrary to the idea that Reitz landed in the U.S. with “only one gold piece,” his wealth and academic experiences provided him with opportunities to pursue various business ventures.⁹⁴ Additionally, despite initial business failures, devastating fires, and impacts on trade caused by the Civil War, Reitz “was never in debt and refused to contract a debt or obligation unless he could pay it on demand” throughout his entire career.⁹⁵ The economic situation that Reitz

⁹² Hoyt, p. 152

⁹³ Elfrieda Lang. “Germans in Vanderburgh County, Indiana Before 1848.” *Studies in Indiana German-Americana* vol. 1 (1988), p. 1-13. p. 9. WLSC

⁹⁴ Lang, p. 10, WLSC

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 10, WLSC

occupied looms in stark opposition to that of many other German immigrants in Evansville, some of which viewed Reitz as a local hero and selfless employer.

Among the non-German citizens and elites of Evansville, John Reitz continued to outperform in terms of growing wealth. For most of Evansville's early industrialization, those whose families had been established in the surrounding region for generations held most of the wealth and power. However, as waves of immigrants began to flow into the city, some found their practices successful and accumulated significant fortunes, undoubtedly those who migrated with prior education and experience like Reitz.⁹⁶ By 1860, "only four German merchants held as much as \$10,000 in property."⁹⁷ However, the number of foreign-born elites grew over the next few decades which allowed for a diversification in representation among the city's elites. Throughout most of Evansville's industrial expansion, employers, especially those that shared cultural demographics with employees, would reside in communities of their working-class counterparts. However, John Reitz, along with others experiencing rapid economic growth, "moved to the waterfront of the upper wards, settling in with the commercial elite."⁹⁸ Reitz, who originally resided in Lamasco a predominantly German, working-class neighborhood, moved to an "enclave of English Protestant" families in what is today the historic district of Evansville.⁹⁹ These moves that Reitz and other elites made beginning in the 1860s and 1870s contributed to not only a geographical separation of wealth, but also a growing divide among the cultures of social classes.

⁹⁶ Lipin, p. 79

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 82

⁹⁸ Lipin, p. 88

⁹⁹ Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 110

Building from his elevated socioeconomic status, Reitz also held a social status that allowed him more flexibility and mobility than that of other German Americans in Evansville. To begin, the mansion that Reitz had built for his family in 1871 in the wealthy, elite community near the Ohio River would dwarf the size of working-class residences such as those in his former community of residence. Where working-class homes would typically hold entire families in around eight hundred square feet, the Reitz family's elegant new home would come to be a staggering nine thousand square feet.¹⁰⁰ This elaborate display of wealth was simultaneously a bold statement of Reitz's desire to be permanently counted among the wealthiest and most powerful of the city's elite class.¹⁰¹ The social status of the Reitz family also allowed them to participate in customs shared among elite families. For many of these families, abundant wealth created opportunities for the passage of wealth, meaning that many of "Evansville's dominant families tended not to cross ethnic or religious lines in marriage."¹⁰² However, as one of the few German Catholic families among the elites, and with ten children, three sons and seven daughters, John and Gertrude Reitz had difficulty finding adequate matches for their children. Although seven children never wed, the marriage of daughter Mary Reitz to a wealthy cigar-manufacturer, Herman Fendrich, was "Among German Catholics, the most significant marriages."¹⁰³ Elevated social status additionally allowed wealthy entrepreneurs like Reitz to pass power and leadership positions to their sons. The oldest of the Reitz children, Francis Joseph, benefited the most from this elite custom, inheriting

¹⁰⁰ Lipin, p. 95

¹⁰¹ The Reitz Home, now the Reitz Home Museum, consists of three floors with twelve, eleven, and ten foot ceilings, respectively, a grand drawing room with custom furniture, two family rooms, a formal and informal dining space, five family bedrooms, one of the first indoor bathrooms in a residential building in the city, servants quarters, a well-equipped kitchen, and a full basement.

¹⁰² Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 154

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 154

not only his father's immense fortunes, but also the businesses and positions he then used to grow his own wealth.¹⁰⁴

As conflict arose in German communities throughout the region during World War I, many immigrants and their descendants who had been a crucial feature of Evansville life and politics now faced strong opposition and discrimination directed at the main features of their identities. Education and the press had long been ways for German Americans to pass aspects of German language and values to new generations and thus became two key targets for those seeking to purge German culture from American life. Through the publication of German American newspapers in German, these communities were able to stay connected to both local and state politics as well as the language. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, "Evansville had several German newspapers...at the beginning of World War I the *Demokrat* was the only German paper" that remained.¹⁰⁵ However as anti-German sentiment increased during the conflict, "Very few of Indiana's German language newspapers" survived, bringing the end to the *Demokrat* in 1918.¹⁰⁶ Prior to the halt in publication due to pressure from anti-German attitudes in the region, the newspaper was read by nearly 5,000 residents.¹⁰⁷

Additionally, schools founded in and by German American communities played a significant role in continuing the strong ties to German heritage in Evansville. Many German Catholic communities, which still exist in the region, share the names of the churches established in them, such as St. Wendel, St. Philip, and St. Joseph.¹⁰⁸ Parochial

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 154

¹⁰⁵ Hoyt, p. 164

¹⁰⁶ Isabel Steenbergen. *Anti-German Sentiment in the Midwest During World War I: The Effects of Anti-German Sentiment on the German Language and Culture*. Netherlands: Radboud University Nijmegen, 2016. p. 22

¹⁰⁷ Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 236

¹⁰⁸ Bigham, *Reflections on a Heritage*

schools for German Catholics and Lutherans “reaffirmed the German identity.”¹⁰⁹ By 1920, thirteen Roman Catholic schools existed in Evansville.¹¹⁰ Instruction at parochial schools and a number of public elementary schools in the city “before 1918 included a great deal of German.”¹¹¹ By 1919, however, a “demand for the removal of German language instruction” in Indiana schools found success in the passing of the McCray Bill, banning the teaching of German.¹¹² Communities of German Americans throughout the state suffered the impacts of such legislation for decades to come. The anti-German hysteria which surrounded World War I contributed to “loss of community identity, loss of language, and loss of neighborhood” for many German Americans and their families.¹¹³

In the wake of forced assimilation, German communities in southern Indiana persisted. While the nation was at war, a new public high school was opened in the west side of the city in 1918. Ironically, while leaders in other regions erased German names from institutions and organizations, this new school was named after Francis Joseph Reitz, one of the city’s leading bankers and a prominent member of the German community.¹¹⁴ Additionally, Evansville media outlets praised Francis Joseph Reitz when he donated nearly one million dollars to create a private Catholic high school in 1922, receiving international recognition from Pope Pius IX for his deeds.¹¹⁵ Clearly, the Reitz family’s influence overpowered, at least in some respects, the anti-German sentiment that impacted so many others. Perhaps, due to the widely-acknowledged success of John

¹⁰⁹ Lipin, p. 101

¹¹⁰ Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 241

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 238

¹¹² Steenbergen, p. 21

¹¹³ Hoyt, p. 172

¹¹⁴ Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 240

¹¹⁵ Grimm RHMC

Reitz, the religious and educational centers he and his family established, and the continued presence of the Reitz name in Evansville history, the German American communities of the twentieth century looked to this family as a memory and also proof of the determination, resilience, and ingenuity of Germans in the region.

The abundance of German Americans in Evansville led to their impact in various aspects of life in the region. John Reitz's success was easily attributed to his identity as a German American. Local newspapers and historical works express that "the sturdy German races have long been noted for courage and determination," using these sentiments to explain the influence Reitz had on this community.¹¹⁶ Even in more recent studies focusing on German American influence in the region, Reitz's impact has not been forgotten. In Darrel Bigham's research on German Americans in Southwestern Indiana, the reality that "German Americans had not only given Evansville its civic leadership but also its moral and spiritual base" seems to stem from the "frugality and industry" that they employ.¹¹⁷ Continuing narratives such as those mentioned previously about German Americans as a whole in Evansville created and continue to uphold ideas of homogeneity throughout these communities. While close-knit communities help to build strong ties to cultural heritage and traditions that continue throughout generations, the same ideas of Germanness that contribute to these positive attributes simultaneously obscure the realities of significant variation in social class and status among the members of this group. Additionally, and possibly the most detrimental impact to Evansville's historical memory, the sense of Germanness associated with Reitz has seemed to

¹¹⁶ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Vanderburgh County, IN*, p. 88

¹¹⁷ Bigham, *Reflections on a Heritage*, p. 5

effectively cancel the possibility that his lumber industry may have destroyed local forests and damaged their ability to recuperate for centuries.

Political Misrepresentation

Alongside cultural authority, John Reitz transferred his widespread popularity into the realm of public service, leading to several successful terms in various positions in state and local politics. Many other powerful businessmen in the industrial era of the nineteenth century became prominent politicians. In cities like Evansville, industrial practices not only brought increased significance and pride to the region, but also more employment opportunities for various groups within the city's developing working class. If the public believed that businessmen brought positive aspects to society, the general public view of these individuals would allow them to hold various positions and maintain the public's trust. For Reitz, success in his economic ventures led to subsequent victories in political campaigns as well as acquiring positions of power in the community.

During the early years of his lumber mill, John Reitz and his family lived in the district known as Lamasco, a community populated mostly by immigrants and other lower- and working-class people. As a wealthy member of this community and a powerful member in Evansville's economic realm, Reitz served on the Lamasco Board of Trustees.¹¹⁸ In 1857 Reitz, then president of the board, helped incorporate the community of Lamasco into the city of Evansville.¹¹⁹ The formal incorporation of Lamasco allowed access to Evansville's social resources for the residents of the town, as well as introduced a significant number of potential voters, specifically those within the demographics most commonly supporting the Democratic Party in Evansville of which Reitz was a

¹¹⁸ Lang, p. 9. WLSC

¹¹⁹ Grimm, RHMC

prominent member.¹²⁰ In all, Lamasco added 1,441 residents to Evansville, nearly half of the 3,325 citizens that made up the city's population prior to the town's incorporation.¹²¹ Undoubtedly, his importance in Lamasco enhanced his image within the constituency of his political party.

In 1862 the citizenry of Vanderburgh and neighboring Posey counties elected John A. Reitz as a state Senator in the 43rd Indiana General Assembly, which convened in 1863. Though he served as a Democrat during the early stages of the Civil War, local historians reconcile this by stating that "it was no small political victory and no little evidence of popularity to be elected to the senate as a Democrat."¹²² Others chime in, emphasizing that "he was a stalwart democrat yet did not place partisanship before the general good nor personal aggrandizement before the welfare of the commonwealth."¹²³ The representations of his partisanship in local histories serves to show that other aspects of his identity seemed more important to the general public than his stance on certain political disputes during his term in state politics, namely his status as a successful German immigrant and a devout Catholic.

However, despite the supposed ability to transcend partisan lines, the reality of his election during the height of the American Civil War and the conflict within the Indiana statehouse leads to a slightly different perception of Reitz's role. In the first election since the outbreak of the war, "Hoosier Democrats flocked to the polls in numbers extraordinary for an off-year election," resulting in the party's control of the statehouse in

¹²⁰ Lipin, p. 78

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 78-79

¹²² Elliott, p. 371

¹²³ Gilbert, p. 15

the next session.¹²⁴ With its close proximity to the South and its antebellum trade with Southern industries, Evansville like other towns and cities in the southern portion of the state tended to disagree with the Republicans who supported the war effort. The political conflicts that existed within the state resulted from cultural differences that had been cemented during earlier eras, what historian Daniel Walker Howe refers to as “Extended Virginia,” emphasizing the similarities between southern Indiana society and that of the southern state of Virginia.¹²⁵ During the Civil War era in Indiana politics, culture was a significant factor of political ideology, as well as “the role of government, the nature of personal freedom, the best means to establish and maintain social order, and the nature of the Union.”¹²⁶ As an elected official during this tumultuous time within state and national politics, John Reitz symbolized both the physical characteristics of the southwestern counties which voted for him as well as the political ideologies that these voters wished to be voiced in the General Assembly.

Following his Civil War era term in the Indiana General Assembly, Reitz returned to Evansville where his position as a prominent employer elevated him further within the local Democratic Party. Prior to the Civil War, the Democratic Party of Evansville “learned to rely on an anti-aristocratic [sic] rhetoric.”¹²⁷ Arguably, Reitz could have been perceived as an aristocrat by the public due to his visible economic success in the lumber industry. However, his identity as a German immigrant allowed him to remain in

¹²⁴ Thomas E. Rodgers. “Liberty, Will, and Violence: The Political Ideology of the Democrats of West-Central Indiana during the Civil War.” *Indiana Magazine of History* 92, no. 2 (1996): 133-159. p. 133

¹²⁵ Daniel Walker Howe. *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2007. p. 139

¹²⁶ Rodgers, p. 140

¹²⁷ Lipin, p. 11

favorable terms with the constituents. Partisan politics in southern Indiana coincided with and intensified cultural divisions. Within Evansville and the surrounding counties:

“Democrats tended to be strongest...among most immigrants and voters with lower status occupations, and among Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Regular Baptists. Republicans attracted merchants and native-born artisans and members of pietistic groups that favored government’s promoting Sabbath legislation, temperance, and public education.”¹²⁸

Religion, nationality, and class all played significant roles in political beliefs and influenced which candidates that local groups would support in state and local elections. Despite strong support from large constituencies, Evansville “merchants and manufacturers continued to occupy a prominent place in local politics,” with heavy representation from German born leaders like John Reitz.¹²⁹ Due to the dominance of wealthy individuals in public offices, “the ballot box was the coffin of class consciousness.”¹³⁰ Although Reitz and other political leaders from both dominant parties in the city may have shared characteristics or backgrounds similar to other groups of the citizenry, the political sphere in Evansville was controlled by wealthy individuals who pursued policies that for the most part reflected the interests of the elite.

The majority of John Reitz’s career in public service took place within municipal councils, boards, and party positions. Following his term in Indiana’s 43rd General Assembly, Reitz returned to Evansville where he was elected to city council, on which he served for many years.¹³¹ His position on the council allowed him to head several projects within the realm of municipal government and gave him the resources to pursue other interests that affected his industrial practices more directly. One such example of

¹²⁸Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 143

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 151

¹³⁰ Lipin, p. 6

¹³¹ Lipin, p. 134

the former claim occurred in the 1860s when the council “chartered the Evansville City Gas Works to supply street and residential lighting via coal gas,” and the list of company directors contained several of Evansville’s wealthiest individuals, John Reitz included.¹³² Outside of city government, Reitz was instrumental in organizing Crescent City Bank for which he was president for a significant portion of his professional life. The bank would be considered “one of the solid banking organizations in the state” and would remain to have a close connection to the Reitz family as Francis Joseph would eventually serve as the president after his father’s passing.¹³³ John Reitz would also become a prominent social and political figure because of his dedication to bringing several rail lines through the city. The Evansville, Carmi and Paducah railroad, which would later become the St. Louis section of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and eventually join with other companies to create the rail giant CSX Corporation, was the focus of Reitz’s work with the transportation industry.¹³⁴ The historical works on Reitz use these contributions to show his popularity in Evansville and create an image of a public servant with the interest of common people in mind.

Contrary to how he may be portrayed as a leader in the local Democratic Party and within municipal government, this narrative may misrepresent the true actions of Reitz, overlooking some of his controversial political views. Many popular representations of Reitz and his work in local government stem from his character as an employer. Due to the widespread success and significance of the sawmill, much of the focus has revolved around this industrial practice rather than Reitz’s other companies.

¹³² Bigham, *Towns and Villages*, p. 145

¹³³ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Vanderburgh County Indiana*, p. 88

¹³⁴ *Historic Reitz Home...The Legacy Lives On*, directed by Mary Ashburn Lewis (1992; Evansville, IN: Lewis Daughters & Sons Studios), DVD. RHMC.

Many historians portray John Reitz as a generous and efficient employer, operating a mill that ran twenty-two out of twenty-four hours a day, six days a week.¹³⁵ Furthermore, one historical work claims that “the work at the mill was never interrupted by a strike.”¹³⁶ In an era of growing concern about workers’ rights and the formation of unions, operating a business without a strike could truly be a testament to the character of the owner.

However, while strikes broke out at various manufacturing centers within the city, Evansville Democrats failed to adequately respond and instead continued to select wealthy elites who did not hold sympathetic views for the struggling workers.¹³⁷ John Reitz, as a leader in the Democratic Party and an elite businessman at the time, shared the disregard for striking workers in the city, publicly stating that “such men should not be helped” and expressing his “opposition to work-relief.”¹³⁸

With an employer so adamantly opposed to providing support, workers at the Reitz mill may have had other reasons for not striking, some that were much different than those portrayed throughout historical works. Few records exist regarding the number of employees at the mill and the wages for which they worked, but Reitz’s stances on workers’ rights may provide some insight. As a leading Democrat and owner of an important place of employment, John Reitz played a significant role in isolating Evansville workers, leaving them few options in terms of political and economic support. In at least one other instance, another Evansville elite, William Heilman, operated a foundry that avoided major disruptions by workers “[suggesting] why he may have been perceived as a benevolent employer,” despite actions that may highlight different

¹³⁵ Morlock, p. 107

¹³⁶ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Vanderburgh County, Indiana*, p. 90

¹³⁷ Lipin, p. 150

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 152-153

intentions.¹³⁹ Arguably, Reitz's privilege as an elite allowed him to hold these views without serious concern of revenue loss or political influence.

Continuing to view Reitz as a selfless public servant obscures his more complicated political career and creates false notions about his identity. Undoubtedly, Reitz remained strongly connected to his German heritage, but his wealth, social status, industrial interests, and political views created a rift between his family and the majority of the population in the city, especially the working-class citizens that would have voted for him. Philanthropic and charitable contributions allowed Reitz and other wealthy leaders a way to gain public following, while remaining to hold immense wealth and exploit workers at the same time. Incomplete narratives surrounding John Reitz's political career have implications in the way his legacy is preserved as well as for the mindsets of people who live after him and learn about his life in discussions about Evansville's success. In these conversations, the people and the environments that faced the negative consequences of Reitz's actions fail to receive adequate attention.

By viewing and portraying John Reitz as a popular, successful public servant during a tumultuous time in regional and national history, the environmental damage that he caused no longer fits in the narrative of a struggling, German immigrant, who like thousands of others in his community traveled an ocean to find economic success. Reitz's role in local politics did more than shape the local economy, it cemented his legacy, especially for those who looked to him as a culmination of the potential for someone with their shared identities. Failing to acknowledge the social inequality, political connections, and environmental damage that allowed Reitz to rise to positions of power and privilege

¹³⁹ Lipin, p. 162

rewrote the story of Evansville's lumber baron. Reexamining Reitz's political history in combination with the environmental destruction he profited from and supported can lead to further reevaluations of other local heroes and the creation of more complete stories that begin challenging long accepted narratives of economic prosperity in the face of natural degradation.

Conclusion

Engaging this environmental analysis in conversation with local histories and how they frame John Reitz as a person and local icon helps to explain why the story of the natural environment has been overlooked in the public memory. John Augustus Reitz and his economic and philanthropic influence appear in nearly all works of Evansville's history, published from 1860 to 1956. Further, when he is mentioned, the portrayals of his life set the framework for an almost heroic remembrance. Other works use similar tactics to highlight how Reitz helped Evansville prosper, portraying him as a community icon, who was especially good spirited and extremely generous with his wealth. To make him relatable, they exploit his German identity in a region with thousands tied to the German culture. The name and legacy of John A. Reitz and the Reitz family are deeply tied to various industries, buildings, and institutions within Evansville. Two high schools, a museum, and a cemetery memorial display the family name, but many historic bank buildings, churches, and railroad lines in the city bear the mark of Reitz influence. However, a lack of adequate information has caused this legacy to continue without addressing the destructive consequences his success had on the natural environment. Without the inclusion of observations and statistics regarding the deforestation of

surrounding regions, the public memory in Evansville is hindered, allowing for the sharing of an incomplete narrative.

When using a lens of environmental history to evaluate local histories and the ways in which they portray Reitz and his impact on Evansville, it is crucial to avoid imposing current morals or understandings of the environment and recently established standards of its protection. The study of environmental history strays from environmental determinism and therefore ensures that cultural bias and societal developments do not construe or affect historical analyses. However, John A. Reitz and his actions bear a direct connection to the destruction that local forests endured during his industrial business ventures. Whether intentional or not, Reitz and his family left his environmental toll out of business records, leading to its omission from newspapers as well as publications by local historians.

Turning to more recent understandings of regional deforestation provides support to the argument that these forests were severely depleted by late twentieth and twenty-first century standards. State and national organizations eventually became aware that the implications were irreversible and would remain that way for generations unless protections existed. Since the Reitz family played such an important role in shaping the social community of Evansville, their legacy has overshadowed any negative consequences of the lumber industry which helped to provide them this influence. Additionally, since access to many of the forests was solely made possible because of extensive rail or river transportation, many of Evansville's citizens would have never faced the damage occurring at the time. Both past and current historians have failed to

shed light on the environmental destruction of the region's history, allowing for an incomplete narrative to be celebrated and passed down through public memory.

As a result of praising John Reitz and overlooking the destruction he caused to the natural environment, entire ecosystems have struggled to survive. Forests and streams that were once teeming with wildlife suffered massive losses when industrialists like Reitz sought the lumber that resided within them. Some damage has been remedied through continued attention and intervention, but other changes have remained permanent, spelling out the loss of habitats, biodiversity, and potentially entire species. Furthermore, accepting the story of John Reitz that has been passed on through local history and public memory means accepting what he and many others like him stood for: growth at any cost. Viewing Reitz as a local hero makes overcoming and recognizing the destructive realities of his practices more difficult. Now the challenge is not simply to incorporate one forgotten aspect of the narrative, but to also reevaluate the entire story.

The argument of this research is not to say that the memorialization of John Reitz and his family are unfounded or products of malicious idolatry. Reitz's focus on religion and culture pervaded and shaped his family relations and the interactions he had with the community. While alive, Reitz contributed to the expansion of Evansville as an industrial hub and supported the creation of physical spaces for people in religious groups or with specific ailments to gather and live. Furthermore, his actions inspired his children to provide similar services to educational institutions, orphanages, and the Catholic Church to which they belonged.

However, the purpose of this study is to revisit the reasons behind celebratory public memories of individuals such as Reitz and spark a conversation around what this

says about the socially accepted values that uphold these views. Reevaluating why historical figures are important to local memory reveals some of the values that were prevalent in their societal context. In the case of John Reitz, the widespread approval of his industrial practices, religious beliefs, and political ideologies during his lifetime shows that he symbolized a public leader and representative of accepted values of nineteenth-century Evansville and other growing cities of that era. Widespread economic growth, expanding communication, and endless use of natural resources for industrial gains all influenced both the ability for Reitz to succeed and the positive reception of his actions by the public. When cultural values reflect economic growth and industrial expansion, society idolizes those who are successful in those sectors, which then influences the views of how society should look and what the priorities of its members should be. For communities of German immigrants, Roman Catholics, and industrial laborers, Reitz symbolized a realization of social mobility and success, even though the reality of the circumstances from which he came were far from that of his less-privileged counterparts. Regardless, the views that his constituents, fellow community members, employees, and others who experienced his presence shaped and continue to influence the way that Reitz and his family are remembered in Evansville.

The history of Evansville, Indiana, as told by prominent local historians, recounts a story of progress and growth in the industrial sector due to the diligent efforts of ambitious entrepreneurs. However, this popular framework has continually omitted or failed to acknowledge the role of, and impact on, the natural environment in the city's past. In a tribute to Francis Joseph Reitz following his death, and many years after many of the initial industrialists had passed away, a prominent local newspaper published a

piece that summarizes the mindsets that persist surrounding these individuals. The article states: “it is the spirit of [Evansville’s] public spirited citizens who have been able to rise, and have risen to meet opportunities that time has presented. It is but proof that man makes his own environment.”¹⁴⁰ Ironically, the environment that many of the men this piece honors comes at the expense of the natural environment.

Evansville’s local forests and the natural topography of the region played significant roles in the city’s success, and the success of its leading entrepreneurs, such as John Augustus Reitz, allowing him to obtain the status of an internationally recognized manufacturer of hardwood lumber. Without the inclusion of the environment in this narrative, historians have effectively passed on a version of this story which forgets the price at which the city’s success was achieved: the destruction of several natural resources and oases for local flora and fauna. Overlooking such an instrumental aspect of this story did not occur instantly, yet as deeper understandings and observations of these impacts arise, it becomes increasingly urgent and necessary to include this tale of natural destruction while the opportunity for preservation remains. Local histories of industrial growth, in Evansville particularly, often extend pride and gratitude for the course of past events, however, audiences must challenge these works and begin to search for the relationships between people and the environment, acknowledging the reciprocal effects on the natural world.

¹⁴⁰ Evansville Journal (Evansville, IN), January 1, 1925. Reitz Collection, WLA.

Appendix

Family Images and Population Diagrams



Figure 1: Portrait of John Augustus Reitz.
Source: RHMC

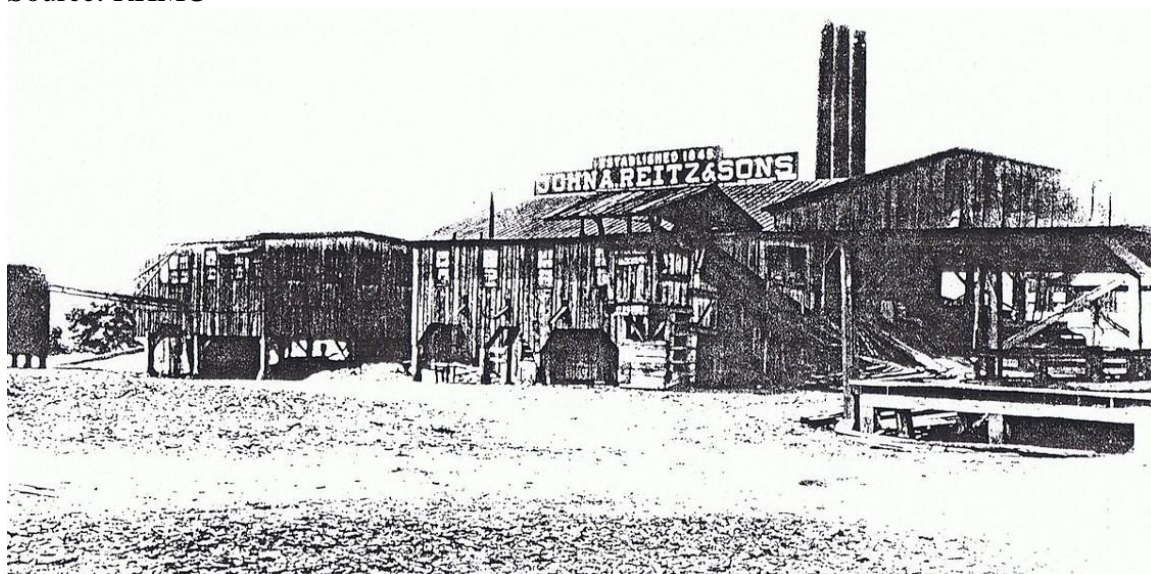


Figure 2: Picture of John A. Reitz & Sons sawmill.
Source: RHMC

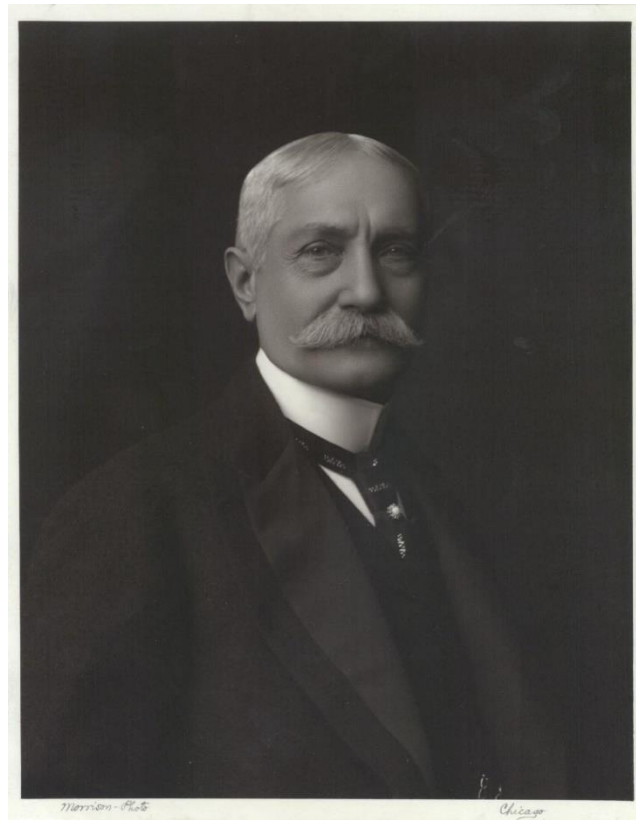


Figure 3: Portrait of Francis Joseph Reitz.
Source: RHMC



Figure 4: Picture of Reitz Home circa 1901.
Source: RHMC

GERMAN-BORN
IN INDIANA, 1880

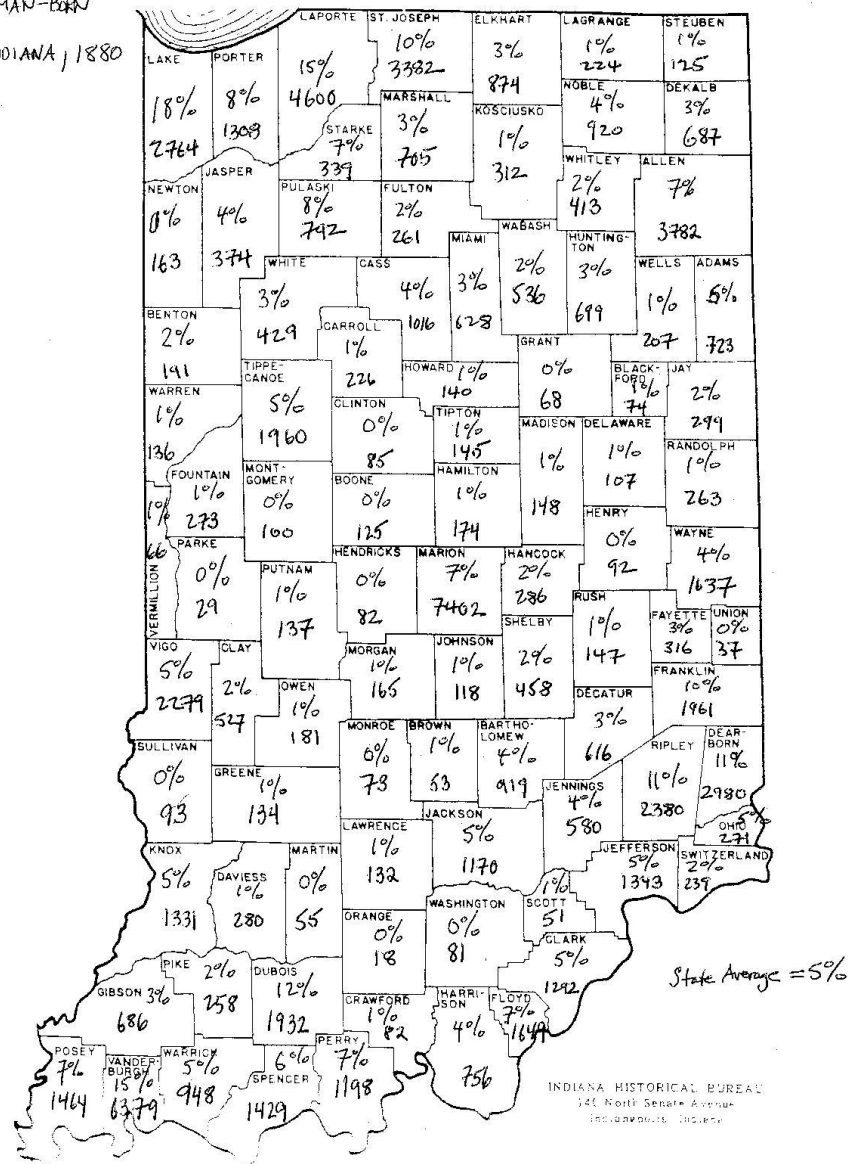


Figure 5: Diagram of German-born residents per county in Indiana, both in proportion to total population and number of German-born.

Sources: Dr. Bruce Bigelow, Department of History and Anthropology, Butler University.

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